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Class in t'Class. 'Troubling' the Space of Class Identity in University Education: Accents and Dialects

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This paper is a commentary on the experiences of working-class students and tutors in elite universities in the United Kingdom with a particular focus on socio-linguistic aspects of accent and dialect. The way that a person speaks involves more than the exchanging of information: it is a distinguishing aspect of identity related to levels of power and prestige. There are explicit and implicit expectations around particular accents and dialects in educational contexts that result in difficult living and learning encounters for both working-class students and tutors. Ideally, student population should reflect the society from which it emanates, but a disadvantageous skew in numbers towards middle-class students and tutors persists. Standard English dialect spoken with Received Pronunciation represents the most prestigious form of speech typically used by middle-class students and tutors in university settings. This paper utilises the theoretical concepts of field, habitus and social and linguistic capital associated with Bourdieu to examine the impact of speaking with working-class accents in the university context. Some anecdotal examples from my own teaching in an elite university are included to illustrate how working-class identity might be utilised and valorised in ameliorating these experiences for all concerned.

Introduction

This paper is a commentary about how university and in particular elite and selective universities are experienced by students and educators who identify as 'working class'. In the context of this article, 'working class' will refer to students from lower socio-economic groups (Bradley 2017).

Bradley points out that access to university continues to be distributed based on social inequality, despite there being an expansion of educational opportunities throughout the European Union. Bradley notes that students from a working-class background are still in the minority in any elite university cohort. For those working-class students who do achieve the required grades and who successfully negotiate the often unfamiliar and daunting barriers of the admis-

sions process itself, the actual lived experience of attending university can be unfamiliar and disorientating (Reay et al. 2009). This is an experience that Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) refer to as students being like a 'fish out of water' in the university setting. This can result in layers of difficulty for these students that are over and above the 'normal' academic challenges. Speaking with accents and dialects which are perceived as less prestigious than others (Lu 2018) may be associated with the 'fish out of water' experience (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992).

Student retention, achievement and drop-out rates are all causes for concern and socio-economic status is one of the factors associated with each of these areas of difficulty (Bradley 2017). One of the ways in which social class is distinguished is through aspects of identity associated with a person's accent and dialect (Trudgill 2002, Lu 2018). This paper explores the implications for students and tutors who speak with accents deemed to be 'non-standard' within the context of university education (Gervertz 2014). I shall examine some ways in which these specific aspects of language and communication can impact upon student experiences, and consider how negative aspects might be ameliorated.

Moore et al. (2016) have written about the explicit or implicit expectations around particular accents and dialects in professional contexts such as teaching. They suggest that strong local accents are devalued in elite professions such as university teaching. They use research from the Recent Social Mobility Commission (2016) to show that these kinds of professions are dominated by more prestigious south-eastern accents. Donnelly et al. (2018) contend that there is a 'continued de facto' expectation of specific accents in such professions. Therefore, in addition to exploring the experience of working-class students in elite universities with regard to accent and dialect, this paper also includes discussion of the experience of retaining a working-class accent and dialect as a tutor in an elite university.

Aspects of accent and dialect are central to a working-class identity and frame the discussion in this paper, which is based around my experiences of teaching on the Foundation Programme at the University of Sheffield. I will also describe two examples of approaches that I use in my work at the University of Sheffield with students from lower socio-economic groups that attempt to address some of the factors noted above related to accent and dialect, and that potentially might have a positive impact upon the student experience.

Context and Demography

In an ideal situation the diversity and social origins of the student population should reflect the society from which it emanates. Moreover, upward social mobility is dependent upon equality of educational opportunity. Thus for higher education institutions to be deemed successful there is a requirement to attract and retain working-class students to degree courses.

According to HEFCE (2017), more students from Low Participant Neighbourhoods (LPN) enrolled in HE in 2016/17 compared with previous years. UCAS (2019) also reported an upward trend in the number of acceptances from LPN. However, a closer look at undergraduate student enrolment by participant characteristics (socio-economic status) shows the number of students with higher and lower managerial and professional family backgrounds make up more than half a million of the students. In contrast, those from routine occupation backgrounds make up just short of seventy four thousand (HEFCE 2017). Thus although the university access gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers has narrowed somewhat in recent years, nevertheless, it seems the gap at the most selective universities remains wide.

The Sutton Trust organisiation, which works to improve social mobility through education, points out that although only 7% of students attend fee-paying independent schools in the United Kingdom, their alumni are disproportionately represented both in professions such as

law, medicine and politics, and at Russell Group universities. This results in a skew towards those from advantaged backgrounds in the 'social soup' of the university experience and away from those students with disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper focuses on the experiences of students from lower socio-economic groups when they dive into this particular 'social soup'.

Theoretical Frameworks

As the introduction and context sections above have noted, attending a good university is not just a matter of ability but is connected also to where you live, how you speak, how you dress and how you feel about the whole experience (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992, Bradley 2017, Moore et al. 2016, Donnelly et al. 2018). There are talented individuals born in every area but there are stark differences in their educational prospects that are associated with socio-economic and cultural factors. The theoretical concepts of 'field', 'habitus' and 'capital', associated with French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, are useful as a framework for this discussion. Bourdieu's writings (1977, 1996, 1998) are grounded within theories associated with cultural deprivation theory and are concerned with the dynamics of power in society and the subtle and diverse ways in which they operate. His concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital are particularly useful in helping us to understand the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education settings.

'Field' is the setting in which particular agents and specific social positions are located, and where habitus is 'played out', for example in elite universities. Bourdieu (1977, 1998) writes about the interaction between the rules of the field, the agent's habitus, and the agent's social, economic and cultural capital. Agents in this paper refer to students and tutors. The kinds of capital that working-class students and tutors bring to the educational field can involve a 'difficult fit' within elite universities. Children inherit cultural capital from parents in the family setting, which in turn converts into educational credentials. Traditional middle-class university students arguably enter university already endowed with the accepted habitus that is associated with the field of elite higher education establishments, thus from this perspective working-class students enter university with disadvantageous habitus.

'Habitus' involves more than the mere habits that a person acquires. Abstract factors such as attitudes and mannerisms as well as concrete factors are involved. The way that a person speaks is about much more than words and information sharing. Bourdieu (1991) uses the notion of linguistic capital to refer to varieties of language that represent the most prestigious form within a given society, implying that use of Standard English (SE) spoken with Received Pronunciation (RP) affords the speaker a higher degree of credibility and respect than accorded to people with working-class accents and dialects.

Trudgill (2002) and Lu (2018) have shown that despite a more egalitarian attitude towards accent in Britain, discrimination still occurs in British society and they write specifically about educational contexts where SE is the dominant form. In this paper I refer specifically to those students from lower socio-economic groups who are studying on the Foundation Programme on which I teach at the University of Sheffield, and the attendant associations between social class, accents and social mobility.

Implications for Students and Tutors

Donnelly et al. (2018) suggest that accents are "unconcealed and overt expressions of self that carry the possibility for instantaneous classed judgments to be made" about a person in the

social world (Donnelly 2018: 5). In this way, accents are used both to position oneself and to be positioned by others. They suggest that this positioning is one element in assigning particular symbolic values of respectability or disgust to a person in relation to accent and dialect that has negative emotional consequences. Reay (2005) has written that working-class students in university settings who feel the need to modify the way they speak are not making simple choices but ones that carry substantial psychological and personal emotional cost and disruption to their sense of self. This could also be argued to be true for tutors who speak with working-class accents and dialect.

Language, accent and dialect are central to individual, collective, historical and political identities that embody much more than mere words and sounds, but a sense of value too. Less accented, more formal, spoken standardised English retains significant high symbolic value, particularly in educational contexts. Conversely, working-class accents and dialects are experienced as being less prestigious and being in need of modification.

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds report that over and above the fact of working-class backgrounds being barriers to actually applying to university, these barriers and other kinds of difficulties manifest within their actual learning and living experiences in universities too (Reay et al. 2009). The ready structural and cultural alignment, which is evident between university institutions and the traditional university student, is generally outwith the knowledge, experience and cultural capital of most working-class students (Bourdieu 1998). How people speak, their accents and dialects, may play a part in the feeling of 'otherness' that is experienced by working-class students. Individuals may feel a need to modify their accent to fit in, believing that they need to construct an identity that is closer to that of those around them in university, including their middle-class tutors.

Student Experiences

Writing on her blog, a former university student (Noor 2018) says that for a working-class student university provides three years' experience in being able to mimic the middle class. Noor points out that the Social Mobility and Poverty Commission found that employers are still using indicators of class, such as accent, rather than ability when they are hiring (Sutton Trust Social Mobility Unit 2016).

Indeed, government advisor Peter Brant's resolution to such dilemmas is that working-class students need to "become more middle class to fit in". He suggests they "need help" to change the ways in which they "eat, dress and conduct personal relationships to get ahead in life" (Gevertz 2014). However, research by the Sutton Trust's Social Mobility Unit, reports that working-class students/individuals are shunning elite universities because of this lack of 'fit' rather than exposing themselves to these kinds of obstacles (Sutton Trust Social Mobility Unit 2016).

A working-class student studying at the University of Sheffield shared his experiences via e-mail about how he made friends with the international students in his cohort rather than the middle-class British students. He says that he did this because he shared with them their feelings of otherness. He writes about the culture shock that he experienced in his first year and how he eventually associated with students from the "other university" in the city (Sheffield Hallam University) who were "more like him" in terms of accent and dialect. Students at that university are more likely to be recruited from the local area and therefore were more familiar to him (2019 email correspondence).

Therefore, when students make choices about whether to continue studying at university or not, these choices are not made entirely around academic factors or abilities but are

shown to be closely related to the wider student experiences associated with 'not fitting in'. This paper draws further upon Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus and cultural capital to explore students' experiences of feeling like "cultural outsiders" (Bourdieu 1996). Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) derived the notion of "fish out of water" to explicate the phenomena of not fitting in and to frame discussion around some potential reasons for student 'drop out'.

Student blogger Jack Gevertz (2014), writing about his experiences as a working class student at a Russell Group university, describes his own 'fish out of water' feelings. He questions the plausibility of him "fitting in" when he describes what he calls a divide between students from working-class backgrounds and the "rest of the student body", let alone the usually middle-class teachers. He worries about the difficulties of "fitting in" amongst wealthy and "well-spoken" peers and how dreadful this makes him feel.

Donnely et al. (2018) use the term "linguistic trauma" to describe the experience for students of speaking with a regional working-class accent in educational contexts and for the potential negative impact on upward social mobility. The use of an emotive term such as 'trauma' suggests that personal emotions such as 'feelings' play an important part in how a student from a working-class background might manage to traverse the experience of university. Freshers' Week was an especially worrying time for Jack. He notes feeling particularly vulnerable about the difference in his accent and those more prestigious accents of many other students who largely spoke using RP. He writes that the other RP-speaking students were surprised that someone with his accent was even attending university (Gervertz 2014). The blog where Jack writes about how inadequate these experiences made him feel illustrates the importance of how some working-class students feel in university contexts. Hierarchies of inequality, such as social class, may be understood as large material structures, but they are evident also at the micro level where they "exist in strings of behavior", for individual students (Collins, 2019) with emotions such as feelings being central to student experiences.

Other working-class students write about their experiences on the blog and recount similar experiences to do with clothes, lack of money and the mocking of low-prestige accents that use "broad vowels". For these students, it is not about sweeping discrimination but rather the building up of a series of small experiences that culminate in an uncomfortable feeling of not 'fitting in'. These students write about the notion of experiencing a culture shock that is as big as that associated with coming from another country. These adjustments are in addition to the difficulties associated with the academic transitions from school to university and can be experienced as overwhelming, sometimes being the "straw that breaks the camel's back" in terms of continuing on the course or not (Gervertz 2014).

Nairz-Wirth, Feldman and Spiegl (2017) write about the need to 'belong' being a fundamental human desire that has implications related to emotions, cognitive patterns and motivations. If experiences of 'not belonging' result in a student feeling like an outsider, the potential for 'drop-out' rises. Russell Hochschild (2019) shows how emotions are social in so many ways. Social class, social status, and social standing clearly shape our emotional experiences. However we are placed in a social order: the family, community, workplace or university, we feel it emotionally. Arguably, therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to engage with emotional labour as integral pedagogical scaffolding in our teaching in addition to addressing academic elements of courses.

Given the expansion of higher education and the changing demographics and numbers of so-called traditional students towards a more diverse student population, it is necessary to engage with the socio-linguistic factors associated with student experiences in university education and visit field and habitus with fresh eyes when preparing and serving up the menu for this diverse social soup.

Responses to 'Fish out of Water' Issues

In the planning and design of programs, modules and classroom sessions, it may be necessary to rethink the kinds of things that are traditionally deemed valuable and academically worthy, to value other ways of being and knowing. We may need to think about alternative ways of relating and communicating, with each other and our students. This would allow educators to reach out, up and around and should enable a revaluing of broader societal experiences. Nairz-Wirth et al. (2017) suggest that a wider perspective on social capital is needed to avoid the discouragement and disengagement of non-traditional students. For example, Emirbayer's (1997) model of relational sociology suggests that the social world is not to be understood entirely from a standpoint of substances or concrete things, or indeed in terms of the solely structural aspects of society. From this perspective it is useful to consider how emotions derive from the significance of identity that emerge from social relations. When working-class students feel alienated in the place and from the product in university then the social relations are ones of estrangement and disorientation.

Burkitt (2019) uses an example from a Dostoevsky novel about a 'poor man' who felt looked down upon by those whom he regarded as being higher up the social order and how he felt degraded and belittled when he overheard a derogatory remark about himself. Burkitt writes about the impact of dominant ideologies where some are accorded higher status and social value in the relational network of a social hierarchy and about the emotional and potential substantive consequences of such relations. However, in the novel Dostoevsky shows us that a negative outcome does not have to be inevitable because the protagonist was motivated to counteract the feelings of inadequacy by finding "words of his own about himself that made him feel proud", moreover, finding a substance of himself that had value. He had been motivated to 'trouble' the taken-for-granted-ness of traditional hierarchies of power and worth, and challenge or realign the accepted canons of knowing and knowledge. It is this kind of 'troubling' of the social soup that I am interested in engaging with in my university teaching. Like the protagonist in Dostoevsky's work, the University of Sheffield student mentioned above (2019) writes about his many difficulties in adjusting to the middle-class milieu he found himself in at university. He thought about how he "stood out like a sore thumb" because of his working-class accent but decided that he was proud of his roots and of the way he spoke, even though he felt that it "wasn't seen in a good light" in the university. It took lots of resilience and emotional cost to withstand these feelings. He feels that the whole experience of university would be improved if not only some of the students but some of the tutors too "sounded more like him".

Melanie Reynolds (2018) writes about the need for "working class lecturers to come out of the closet", retain their working-class identities (including accent/dialect) and to act as role models for students to improve the learning environment for students from working-class backgrounds. She argues that too many poorer students feel that they do not fit in at elite universities and that more academics who are proud to be from a similar background are needed. Reynolds argues that it is important to show students that intellectual capability is not related to an RP accent or to middle-class values. Having more academics from similar backgrounds would help working-class students feel less alienated but is difficult to achieve if academics continue to change their accent and hide their backgrounds and working class roots in order for them to fit in with more middle-class colleagues. Professor Graham Allen (2018) urges academics from this kind of background to use class as a "badge of honor" much like the protagonist in Dostoevsky and the resilient University of Sheffield student mentioned above.

Government advisor Peter Brandt's somewhat patronizing suggestion that working-class students 'need help' to 'fit in' in elite universities could be interpreted as sustaining the continued reproduction of a middle/upper class 'closed shop'. Arguably, this shows more con-

cern for maintaining a template for retaining the status quo and classical canons, than for reaching out to working-class students. If the aim of universities is to encourage working-class intellectual inquiry, it is incumbent upon tutors to engage with the process of troubling the existing 'social soup' in lecture halls and classrooms across the whole of the 'chalk face' and the university system.

Examples in Practice

I have attempted to do this in two ways in my teaching: firstly, with regard to teaching delivery (in terms of how I speak), and secondly, with regard to session content. I am 'troubling' notions of what kinds of things are valued and why, of what kinds of things are regarded as credible knowledge, of whose voices are heard. Each of these strategies attempts to impact positively upon the experience of working-class students in the university at which I teach. However, I hope too that approached in this way, my classes might open up and broaden the overall academic intellectual and socio-cultural experiences of all of the students, not just the ones from lower socio-economic groups, thus valuing a broad range of experiences.

The cohorts of students that make up my classes vary in terms of socio-economic position. However, often the younger ones are traditional middle-class students, with SE dialects and RP accents, whereas the more mature students from a local pool of working-class entrants have broad accents and use local dialect. I am a Yorkshire woman who speaks (if not using any accent modification) with a 'broad' working class accent and dialect. Taking my cue from Reynolds (2018), who urges "working class lecturers to come out of the closet", I have made a conscious and purposeful decision not to modify the way that I speak (towards SE and RP) in my working context. This is a 'double whammy' surprise for all of the students. Both 'sets' of students expect that academics will have SE dialect and an RP accent. In this way I am 'troubling' their expectations and challenging their 'taken-for-granted' knowing. I take a chance here that I might myself lose the respect of students, given that intellect and prestige are so closely associated with certain standard accents and dialects, so I have to earn it in different ways. I am saved by 'knowing my stuff', and through my commitment to their education. So far I have found that 'being myself' in the classroom quickly has a positive and settling impact upon the working-class students, who see in me an example of someone whom they recognise and whose achievements they might also aspire to. This is evident via comments on student evaluations and personal tutor interactions and feedback and also through classroom interactions. It sometimes takes a little longer for the traditional, middle-class, SE- and RP-speaking students to acclimatise to me and to trust the value of what we do together. For sure, when I argue that lack of discernible accent is no indication at all of intellectual ability, integrity, honesty or reliability, it can be experienced as challenging for SE/RP speakers. Unpeeling layers of privilege and taken-for-granted advantage can be an uncomfortable experience.

Eventually, though, when valuing each of our differences, diversities and uniqueness in the classroom, it is an enriching experience. When it is problematic, when we find it hard to hear each other, then it 'opens up' and raises questions rather than closes down or marginalises, which is surely the aim of education. We learn together that it is reasonable to adhere to agreed academic standards of writing without having to deny personal means of expression through vocabulary, accent and dialect because they are a valid part of identity

There is an academic expectation that students will engage with accredited scholarly works in the pursuit of their degree qualifications, that they will familiarise themselves with and critically appraise accepted traditional canons in their given area of study. Some students will arrive at university readily armed with, if not the specific knowledge, then this kind of 'knowing'

or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977); they arrive bestowed with this kind of prestigious cultural capital already being part of their identity. If the kinds of questions we ask, the kinds of topics, materials and resources that we use, stay within the boundaries of traditional canons and theories, then we are marginalising and disadvantaging some sections of society. As student bodies become more culturally diverse, it is important to reach out to the 'other' and to begin to valorise broader identities and experiences.

I actively encourage students to bring their own experiences, 'stories' and anecdotes to the classroom setting. In my teaching I use my own working-class anecdotal examples as worthy vehicles upon which to travel towards (and to challenge) classical theories and canons rather than regarding personal anecdotes as colloquially unworthy examples. Students say to me that they find it easier to relate to the theories when I share anecdotes that explicate and link to the theories they are being introduced to.

For example, we create theory/story maps, which valorise the experiences of homeless people, of sex workers, trans and gay groups, etc., and examine a range of theoretical positions for any substantive topic that they choose. One group very effectively used Peppa Pig to illustrate Functionalist sociological approaches to the family, and Balamory, with its more diverse outlook, to analyse it – partly from a Marxist feminist perspective! The topics of poverty and social inequality lend themselves particularly well to giving voice and value to maligned societal groups using a wide range of theoretical perspectives. I actively draw upon the direct experiences of students themselves. I have used their own Roma and Traveler experiences, for example, to juxtapose with Northern working-class traditions in explication of sociological and psychological theoretical concepts with great success.

There is the danger that using personal anecdotes will be regarded scholastically as reducing and diluting the scholarship to commonsense/individualistic explanations and understandings. These limitations have to be acknowledged, accounted for and guarded against, for sure. The discipline of sociology lends itself particularly well to giving value to a wide range of experiences. This approach may well be more challenging in other disciplines.

In Summary

Factors discussed above (context/demography) in relation to recruitment, enrolment and access for non-traditional students do seem to be starting to have a positive impact in terms of attracting non-traditional students to degree study. However, the actual lived experiences of students in elite universities can still be problematic for some students with regard to socio-economic status. This paper has considered the impact of non-standard accents and dialects amongst other markers of prestige and privilege on students' experiences of university. It has also described some things that I have implemented myself to address these issues in my teaching practice.

It is my intention through my work as an educator in an elite institution to show that, although there is evidence aplenty to demonstrate conflicting and potentially disadvantageous field and habitus factors, nevertheless negative experiences do not have to be inevitable for working-class students in elite universities. Furthermore, my hope is that students from a range of socio-economic background can come to value each other's experiences as worthy and valid.

In support and encouragement, I receive many post-classroom testimonials from students that show the worth of the approach that I am taking and which encourage me to continue. As a closing statement, I share here one example of correspondence that I received from a student who found my approach helpful and meaningful:

> I just wanted to let you know that I have found your sociology classes enjoyable & informative. However, what I found most pleasing and inspiring was the fact that you are from a town not too far away from my own. I found the common ground that we shared due to our environment, colloquialism and accent had an impact on me. It further motivated me, letting me know that someone from a similar background has succeeded in their aspirations therefore I can. Thank you for being you. (2019 e-mail correspondence)

A little mixing of the 'social soup', a little 'troubling' of the waters for all the fish to swim in may not create giant waves of change but a tiny ripple is a start.

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